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ABSTRACT

The Roberts Assistance Program (RAP), a model program for student assistance and suicide prevention established in 1988 by the Owen J. Roberts School District in Chester County, Pennsylvania provides services to students in kindergarten through grade 12. Core teams of school professionals from the high school and middle school have received student assistance program (SAP) training to identify and intervene with students who are at risk for substance abuse, depression, suicide, eating disorders, and other emotional concerns. Core teams will also be trained at the elementary school level. Teams consist of a building administrator, counselor, nurse, several teachers, and the coordinator of student assistance programs and services. Prevention services offered by RAP include such educational efforts as the K-12 prevention curriculum for students, faculty in-service programs, and community education. Intervention services include the use of crisis response teams and the establishment of specific procedural guidelines to address drug and alcohol emergencies, cases of child abuse or neglect, runaways, suicide ideation, suicide threats, and suicide attempts. Postvention services are designed to enable school personnel to provide a sense of calm and security for students during the aftermath of a tragedy. Postvention guidelines have been established for administrators, teachers, support staff, individuals at drop-in centers, and the crisis response team. Guidelines outline notification procedures, postvention services, and follow-up strategies. An evaluation of the program revealed that 92% of students believed that the schools should provide such services. (NB)

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S U I C I D E P R E V E N T I O N : T H E S T U D E N T A S S I S T A N C E M O D E L

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ABSTRACT

The Owen J. Roberts School District, located in Chester County, Pennsylvania, has had a student assistance program since 1988. The Roberts Assistance Program is designed to identify, intervene, and refer students who are experiencing difficulties due to alcohol and other drug involvement and/or emotional concerns. RAP is a model program in that it provides K-12 services. The program has been recognized at both the state and national levels. A full time Coordinator of Student Assistance Programs oversees the services of RAP throughout the school district. These prevention, intervention and postvention services are described in this paper.

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S U I C I D E P R E V E N T I O N : T H E S T U D E N T A S S I S T A N C E M O D E L

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The number of Student Assistance Programs (SAP) in Pennsylvania is growing every day. As of August, 1990, 768 secondary school buildings have an SAP, representing 454 out of 501 Pennsylvania school districts. These school based programs are designed to identify, intervene, and refer students who are experiencing difficulties due to alcohol and other drug involvement and/or emotional concerns. The success of the Pennsylvania SAP model is demonstrated by the fact that approximately 1,525 students were referred to drug treatment and 1,993 students were referred to mental health treatment during the 1988-89 school year.

The Owen J. Roberts School District located in southeastern Pennsylvania has made a firm commitment to provide K-12 student assistance services. This paper will describe the Roberts Assistance Program and how it serves as a vehicle for suicide prevention programming.

The Owen J. Roberts School Community

The Owen J. Roberts School District is located approximately 35 miles northwest of Philadelphia. The District has a population of approximately 24,000 and covers an area of approximately 100 square miles consisting of North Coventry, East Coventry, South Coventry, Nantmeal, Warwick, East and West Vincent Townships. It is predominately rural-suburban residential with a significant portion of the land area involving agricultural and dairy farming activities. Approximately 3,500 students are enrolled in the Owen J. Roberts School District, including 1,688 high school and middle school students.

The Roberts Assistance Program (RAP)

The Owen J. Roberts School District is not isolated or immune from the nation-wide problems of substance abuse, depression, and the devastating effects of adolescent suicide. Obviously, these behaviors have a profound impact on the learning process of students. This situation is being addressed in the school district through the Roberts Assistance Program.

Core teams of school professionals from the Owen J. Roberts High School and Middle School have received SAP training to identify and intervene with students who are "at risk" for substance abuse, depression, suicide, eating disorders, and other emotional concerns. Core teams will soon be trained at the elementary school level. The core teams consist of a building administrator, counselor, school nurse, several teachers, and the Coordinator of Student Assistance Programs and Services.

As a full-time SAP administrator, it is the responsibility of the Coordinator of Student Assistance Programs and Services to oversee RAP services throughout the district. These services are described in the following paragraphs.

Prevention Services

Much of the prevention activities conducted in the school district are educational in nature. These include: K-12 prevention curriculum for students, faculty in-service programs, and community education. The focus of the educational component is to increase awareness of "at risk" conditions, enhance problem-solving skills, and introduce options for assistance.

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The Health curriculum is in the process of being enhanced across all grade levels in the school district. The goal of our Health educators is to develop a K-12 Wellness curriculum. This curriculum includes five components of wellness: social, emotional, mental, physical, and self awareness. To date, the Health curriculum in Kindergarten through fifth grades has been reorganized in the Wellness framework.

Prevention activities at Owen J. Roberts are designed to send a message to each student that he/she is unique and special. This is accomplished through a continual effort to improve school climate. For example, a K-12 Mentor Program in which drug free teens work with elementary school children has served to encourage healthy behavior.

Intervention Services

"Crisis response teams" have been trained in crisis intervention techniques throughout the school district. Specific procedural guidelines have been established in the district to address drug/alcohol emergencies, cases of child abuse/neglect, runaway situations, suicide ideation, suicide threats, and suicide attempts. The Coordinator of Student Assistance Programs and Services is immediately called in as a consultant during these times of crisis.

The beauty of the Roberts Assistance Program is that it is designed to prevent crisis situations through a process of early intervention. The RAP Core Team receives referrals from teachers, students, parents, and other concerned individuals when it looks like a student is headed for trouble.

Once a referral is received, the Team determines if it is an appropriate referral for the program. For instance, a referral that primarily encompasses

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academic concerns would be turned over to the student's guidance counselor. The RAP Core Team will accept referrals where the following types of problems are suspected: substance abuse, depression, suicide risk, family dysfunction, eating disorders, and other mental health issues.

Upon determination that a referral is appropriate for RAP involvement, the Team collects data on the student's behavior. Data is collected from the student's guidance counselor, his/her teachers, a building administrator, the school nurse, and other school personnel who are familiar with the student. This data is used to formulate a plan of intervention.

When a student's behavior indicates that he/she is headed for trouble, the RAP Team takes an active role to intervene. Intervention meetings are held with the student and his/her parents. The purpose of an intervention meeting is to share information which has caused concern about the student's situation. Options for seeking help are discussed at the meeting.

As a result of the RAP interventions, many students are able to seek professional help before a crisis situation occurs. Referrals are made to outside service providers such as family therapists, psychologists, addiction counselors, and residential treatment facilities. Students also benefit from in-school support groups including intervention group, wellness group, self esteem group, after care group, and children of alcoholics group. Selected students may also participate in the Sponsorship Program in which a teacher volunteers to be a support person to the student.

Postvention Services

In the aftermath of tragedy it is especially important for school personnel

to provide a sense of calm and security for students. Specific procedural guidelines have been established in the district with these goals in mind. These guidelines outline notification procedures, postvention services, and follow-up strategies. Separate guidelines are detailed for administrators, teachers, support staff, individuals manning drop-in centers, and the crisis response teams.

Evaluation

The Owen J. Roberts Student Assistance Program has been in operation since 1988 at the high school and since 1989 at the middle school. Listed below is data that was collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the program:

- o 92% of the high school and middle school students believe that the school should provide student assistance services.
- o 66% of the high school students and 76% of the middle school students report that they would refer a troubled friend to the program.
- o 39% of the students and 78% of the teachers at the high school report that they know someone who has been helped by SAP.
- o 11% of the high school students report that they have been personally helped by SAP.
- o 38 high school students and 15 middle school students were referred for treatment by SAP during the 1989-90 school year.
- o 50 high school students and 65 middle school students participated in school based support groups during the 1989-90 school year.

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The Owen J. Roberts Suicide Prevention/Postvention Plan has been selected as a state model by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. For additional information regarding the crisis response plan or any other Student Assistance Program information, please contact:

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